

## Prohibition: the Lie of the Land

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*Prohibition: The Lie of the Land*, by Sean Dennis Cashman. New York and London: The Free Press, 1981. pp. xiv, 290. Photographs, bibliography, index. \$17.95.

The early twentieth-century attempt of the United States to eliminate the use of alcoholic beverages by passing a law to bar their manufacture, sale, or transportation has long fascinated foreign observers. American national prohibition was only one of several contemporaneous efforts by modernizing nations to confront the serious social problem of alcohol abuse. Norway, Finland, and several Canadian provinces also undertook prohibition. Sweden and other Canadian provinces tried rationing systems and non-profit sales monopolies. Denmark experimented with high taxes on liquor, while Britain used licensing and strict regulation of retail outlets. Yet the American attempt was unparalleled in magnitude and character. Only the United States declared national prohibition to be a fundamental objective of government and amended its Constitution to put a total liquor ban into effect.

The failure of America to achieve its temperance goal, not to mention the widespread flouting of the law, provoked considerable foreign notice and discussion. Recognition became so international by the mid-1920s that Germans Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill used the world of Chicago bootleggers as a metaphor for corrupt and tawdry modern society in their opera, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. As Weill explained, "For every age and part of the world there is a place about which fantasies are written. In Mozart's time it was Turkey. For Shakespeare it was Italy. For us in Germany it was always America. We had read about Jack London and knew absolutely all about your Chicago gangsters, and that was the end."

No wonder then that English historian, Sean Dennis Cashman, a lecturer in American history at the University of Manchester, is intrigued by what Herbert Hoover called America's "great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose." Cashman declares it his goal to provide a comprehensive analysis of Prohibition based on all available evidence. Unfortunately, he falls far short of the standard set by his countryman Andres Sinclair's excellent 1962 work, *Prohibition: The Era of Excess*, or Norman H. Clark's stimulating 1975 book, *Deliver Us From Evil*. Cashman is satisfied to repeat popular notions about Prohibition, relying on older, flawed accounts of the period and slighting recent scholarly attempts to probe beyond misleading stereotypes. Focusing on a few leading bootleggers and temperance crusaders and treating the 1920s as a lost weekend for

flappers and fanatics, he ignores the millions of people who managed to live normal, unspectacular lives with or without alcohol. Cashman wastes his opportunity to bring to bear an outsider's useful perspective to ask new questions and offer a fresh analysis. Instead he recrosses ground covered by recent popular accounts such as John Kobler, *Ardent Spirits* (1973) and Thomas M. Coffey, *The Long Thirst* (1975) not to mention others before them. Any reader hoping for new insights into national prohibition will be disappointed to see this opportunity surrendered.

Cashman treats the adoption of prohibition briefly, accepting the notion that dry fanatics put it over. He ignores the obvious fact that widespread support is necessary to win the two-thirds congressional support and ratification by three-fourths of the states necessary for any constitutional amendment. Avoiding the question of the law's affect on overall drinking, he concentrates on enforcement difficulties. At least 40 percent of his 240-page text is devoted to a detailed recounting of Chicago and New York bootlegger wars. Although he names dozens of minor gangsters and describes their endless battles, Cashman neglects Humbert Nelli's fine social structural analysis of bootlegging, *The Business of Crime* (1976). Cashman treats the 1928 election as a pivotal debate over prohibition, but then discounts the significance of Herbert Hoover's victory. By regarding it as an ordinary political struggle rather than seriously considering the requirements for constitutional change, he takes the political battle over national prohibition too lightly. Repeal is attributed to economic pressure created by depression and social pressure caused by lawbreaking. The complex and difficult constitutional process of removing the law, including the only use of state ratifying conventions since the original adoption of the Constitution, is totally ignored. Conditions following repeal also escape notice.

This book, by simply repeating old clichés, fails to adequately explain the phenomenon of national prohibition to a non-American audience. Nor will it enlighten American readers as to how foreigners view their "noble experiment." Dreary prose (including several dreadful extended alliterations), frequent minor factual errors, and a curious appendix composed of passages apparently struck from the body of the text but which the author couldn't bear to abandon altogether, contribute to the overall impression that this is an ill-conceived and unnecessary book.

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